TL 4303

Travels in East Timor

Arriving in Dili on a domestic flight from Bali, I am called aside to go through "immigration". This does little to enhance the argument that East Timor is fully integrated into the country as the 27th province of Indonesia. So begins a few weeks of continual questioning by the "authorities" - often I was not sure which authority - on my reasons for being in East Timor.

It is a game which all visitors must play with the Indonesian state, although no-one can admit to playing the game. Does anyone really visit East Timor simply to see the sights? Clearly, Indonesia does not think so, but they go through the charade of promoting tourism to the province and producing travel brochures. My request for these at the tourist office in Dili, a few hours later, causes some consternation.

The office is unsignposted and all but deserted. A hello at the door eventually produce someone who produces someone else who shows me to an empty office and tells me to wait. Nothing around me suggests tourism promotion or information - bare walls and empty desks, a locked cupboard; I am offered some water and gratefully accept, having searched through Dili heat to find the place. An official eventually arrives and asked me what I want. "Tourist information, please. Do you have a map, by any chance?" The expression on the face seems to indicate surprise, but composure returns and, after some searching, a map and some brochures are found.

Within hours of arriving I am filled with a sense of the oppression, of the quiet desperation of the people. As I walk down the street, a voice calls out the freedom slogan "Viva Timor L'este!", just loud enough for me to hear. People insist that I photograph them - even demand it. At the moment of exposure they flash two fingers in the victory sign. These small acts of defiance ensure that the tourist takes home some evidence, however intangible, of the ongoing resistance to Indonesian authority.

So, why am I in East Timor? First, like most Australians, I hear occasional news about it - a place with many problems, an ongoing thorn in the Indonesian side. Many know that it was invaded by Indonesia in 1975, and that there is something a little shameful in the way successive Australian governments have handled the issue. I certainly was not aware of the depth of our relationship with the East Timorese people, growing largely out of fighting alongside them against the Japanese invaders in WWII.

I am unapologetically interested in politics and development. I am interested in *problem places*, so to speak, and in visiting them. My questioners seem determined to find out whether or not I am a journalist - even to trick me into admitting it - and since

I claim not to be, what exactly my profession is. "Human geographer" does nothing to alleviate their concerns; it only creates confusion.

There seem to be some unwritten rules about travel in East Timor.

1) You may not show an interest in politics.
2) You may not photograph military installations or personnel (which includes police and police stations), cemeteries or demonstrations.
3) You must report to the police upon arrival in every town you visit.

On one occasion I am asked by someone what I know about East Timor, meaning "what did I know about politics in East Timor". I say that I know there are a lot of problems in accepting Indonesian sovereignty, and that some people are still fighting the government.

One man present is later introduced as a "captain in the intelligence". On learning I am from Sydney, they ask me if I know José Ramos Horta.
"No".
"Do you know who he is?"
"Yes".
"How do you know?"
"Well, he has just won the Nobel Peace Prize; he's in the news a fair bit."
"Oh. Do you know ...", and so on.

Knowledge arouses suspicion for such people. So does any interest in local economic or social conditions. Implicit in the rules, and the general attitude of the Indonesian authorities, is an idea that tourists are *not* interested in politics, human rights, or the single most important issue in any place they visit. Anyone with such interests cannot be a genuine tourist.

I had noticed travelling on the flight from Dili was group of nuns, priests and bishops. Later I find out that they are visiting East Timor for the investiture of the first bishop in the new Diocese of Baucau. Two days after arriving I find myself accepting a ride from Dili to Baucau in the back of a truck with about fifty students.

The road winds along the coast around verdant hills dotted with trees somewhat reminiscent of eucalypts. This is more than coincidental, as Australian fauna has much in common with the islands to the north, and east of the Wallace line. The slopes rise into misty heights, and drop, at times precipitously, into a deep blue sea. The island of Wetar looms on the horizon. The sun beats down as the truck bumps and rocks, crawling up the steep hills and taking the long descent in low gear. Packed like

upright sardines we lurch and crumple into a crush of bodies with each bend in the road.

A young man leads the rosary and others follow solemnly as the miles roll by. After the rosary, fifty young voices break into songs of haunting and passion and melancholy. There can be no mistaking that these people have known much suffering.

The occasion is as much a political one as religious. These two spheres of human life are fused as one on this half-forgotten half of an island between Asia and Australia. The Catholic church is protector, refuge, hope and a home for the dream of liberation from Indonesian occupation.

Two eagles glide ahead of the truck, like an omen, a portent of what, I do not know. The roadside is lined with upright sticks adorned with little loops of leaves or palm fronds. In every town children rush to the roadside and wave at the truck. Military checkpoints are frequent, but they are unmanned and today celebration is in the air.

The students drop me outside the town's only hotel, The Flamboyant, most definitely misnamed and, in any case, full. The manager agrees to let me sleep on a stretcher in an adjacent hall. The ceremony takes place the following day. I am told not to worry about anything - the military have been ordered to stay out of town for the day, as this is one of the rare occasions that the foreign media are allowed into East Timor.

Thousands of people line the streets and the bishops solemnly walk down an avenue to the new, but simple, cathedral. Young men in black T-shirts act as the bishop's security guards, older men with banners and drums act as a more formal guard of honour. The singing moves me to tears.

As the activities draw to a close, a mounting tension seems to break. I see a scuffle and dozens of young guards chasing a few men. A young man is arrested - accused of being an informer - and I suspect he is to be beaten. His face is filled with fear, but today is to be one of peace and he is warned and released. Others raise a few banners in an attempted "demonstration", but the banners are downed by the bishop's security men. Today, the tables are turned; the Timorese want no trouble, while the Indonesians seem to feel that a political demonstration on a day such as this will discredit their opposition in the eyes of the world media.

Everywhere I go, I am told of demonstrations that may or may not happen. On the streets of Dili, I am approached a number of times by young men asking if I am interested in witnessing a demo. "It will be tomorrow at ten o'clock. Just follow the people and you will find it." Sometimes, as in both demonstrations I heard of

during my visit, the demo is said to have been arranged by the Indonesians. The Timorese say that it is a strategy to confuse them. The military are able to see who attends the demo and then arrest them or simply record the information for their files.

The use of informers and stooges causes great resentment, splitting the Timorese people and placing them in awful dilemmas. People who have or want government jobs are under particular pressure. The cost of a job can be betrayal of your people.

On the return to Dili, I manage to get a ride with some foreign journalists in a taxi. We are stopped en route by another truck full of students. They hang a banner over the back of the truck - it bears images of jailed guerilla leader Xanana Guzmao and Bishop Belo and demands East Timor's independence. But in their fear of being seen, they have hung the banner out back to front. Then they try to stuff it through our window. We refuse it - to be found with such an item would invite great trouble.

Even greater trouble awaits those who demonstrate and carry such banners. In Dili I meet some people said to be from the "resistance". I am shown photographs of young Timorese who have been tortured and murdered by the military. Their bodies are beaten and bloody, and the Timorese flag has been draped over them for some pictures. I ask in amazement how they were able to get such pictures, and I am told that the torturers, who made the photos and also appear in the pictures, sold the pictures to them. As I leave, I am urged to take photos of military cemeteries.

"Why?", I ask.
"Because we want the world to see that the fight is still going on, and that Indonesian soldiers are still being killed".

Each grave of an Indonesian soldier is a symbol of the success of the resistance - like a trophy staking a claim to the vigour of their struggle.

I am amazed that the students will risk so much for the sake of seeing a few photographs reach the outside world. Again and again, I have similar experiences. People beg me, implore me, even demand that I make defiant photographs of them to show the world that the resistance is still alive and strong in East Timor.

The message seethes and wells up, this time at a Palm Sunday service in Dili where I am the only foreigner amongst hundreds gathered in the church grounds, for the church cannot contain such a crowd. After it is over, some young men ask me to follow them. I sense that something has happened; there is fear on people's faces and an urgency. I am hurried behind an outbuilding where a makeshift clinic has been established and the nuns are

tending to four injured young men. They have been beaten by the military in an early morning demonstration to mark the arrival of Jamsheed Marker, UN Special Envoy to East Timor. One man has been shot, but it seems he will survive. They cannot seek treatment at the hospitals as they will be arrested there and face possible detention and torture. I am told to take photographs, and then a four page manifesto is thrust into my hands as I hurriedly leave.

I hear that forty people were arrested at that demonstration; another rumor says that four people died - later I hear six. As I leave the church, I notice that police or troops in riot gear have blocked off the roads. I am scared and find a taxi driver. He is Timorese and I have to trust him. I ask him to get me out of there. This he does and I return to my guest house shaken and scared. It is time to leave Dili.

I travel to regional towns - Ermera, Venilale, Viqueque, Maubisse, Los Palos, Suai. The names are so exotic, so un-Asian with their Portuguese spelling. Not much of the Portuguese architecture remains - a few churches, houses and schools. But the language is still widely spoken by people of about 40 and older. My rusty Portuguese is called into urgent service and I manage, at least, to forge some kind of communication with the Timorese. People love to talk, but any kind of politics provokes a barrier which may terminate the encounter. The fear is always apparent.

In every town the police call me to answer questions. In some, the military do so, too. It is tedious and time-consuming. Sometimes my arrival and lack of Indonesian language causes great concern. Soldiers radio to headquarters awaiting instructions for dealing with the tourist. I am irritated - I watch impatiently as a soldier copies details from my passport, inspects my visas, and writes down everything from my place of birth to the number of a French visa issued in Amsterdam. They seem to fear making any decision.

I try to be friendly; a soldier talks of East Timor as a hardship posting. A policeman from Kalimantan wants to go home, but transfers are not easily arranged. He could resign from the force, but he fears he could not find another job which would support his wife and children. In Los Palos, an officer named Gun follows me all over town - talking and asking questions. He is friendly, and invites me to his quarters to watch Mr Bean on TV, but I am suspicious of him and feel that he is trying to monitor my movements.

I travel on minibuses known as "microlets". They are brightly coloured, and have names such as Phoebe, Adelaide, Travolta, Gloria, Traque de Victoria, Quo Vadis, Shirley and Amanda. They travel slowly on the winding roads, and overworked tape players pump out Timorese pop music. Stopping every few minutes to pick

up or drop off passengers, I am crushed into the back with the friendly Timorese. Mostly we just manage to exchange pleasantries, they ask where I'm from, and so on, but occasionally someone speaks some English or we battle on in Portuguese. My dictionary is always close at hand. My backpack is awkward to get in and out and I come to feel that such vehicles were not designed for people of my size, so I take to riding in the front seat whenever possible. On one occasion I discover that I have "chartered" the vehicle to the distant town of Los Palos while I thought I was an ordinary passenger, and I find myself facing a nasty argument over price. In the best of outcomes we compromise and shake hands. I never have a sense that the Timorese are out to cheat me.

Accommodation is poor and expensive for what it is. In one town there is none. We are high in the hills and mist is wafting through the town. The police interview me for an hour, and then say that I can sleep on the concrete floor of the station. This option does not appeal and I say that I will try the church.

I go looking for the priest, and am directed to the nuns' house.

"Good afternoon, Madré..."
I am interrupted with "I can't speak to you about the situation. If you are looking for the women, they are not here".
"Which women?"
"They are not here".
"I'm actually looking for the priest".
"Oh, you'll find him in that house over there".

The priest feeds me well and puts me up in a room kept for seminarians. I ask about "the women" and what is going on. In a hushed voice he tells me that there has been an incident in which two young women were "arrested" by soldiers who claimed that the women were trying to make contact with guerillas. They were detained without charges for some weeks, repeatedly raped and beaten. A church delegation from Dili has secured their release and they are now being cared for by the nuns. No charges have been laid against the soldiers, but the church is trying to work with the military to ensure that this kind of atrocity does not happen again.

Next day I travel on. East Timor is poor, Whole hillsides are eroding, denuded of trees. Large rivers have silted up, their beds littered with trunks of washed away trees. The once plentiful sandalwood is all but gone - exploited by the Portuguese and finished off by the new colonists in Jakarta. It is one of the poorest places I have seen; the poorest province of Indonesia by any measure. There is little evidence of industry. The markets are sparse and people sit all day with a few vegetables before them on a mat. There are few private cars. Almost all shops appear to be owned and run by Indonesian

immigrants, gradually moving in from the islands to the west - Java, Bali, Flores, Sumatra. The Timorese are poor, subsistence farmers, increasingly marginalised in their own land. I am told that many of the educated elite fled to Portugal and Australia in the years following the Indonesian invasion in 1975.

Those that remained suffered years of brutality and hardship. A nun tells me how at the age of one she fled to the mountains with her family to escape the war in the towns. At the age of two she learned how to keep quiet and still, knowing her life depended on it. She survived bombing raids and once was separated from her parents for three weeks, surviving on roots and berries. Incredibly, all her immediate family survived the three years in the mountains, but she saw her pregnant aunt die when the baby - the child of a resistance leader - was cut from her belly by an Indonesian soldier.

Such stories are common in East Timor. Well over a hundred thousand Timorese died in the few years following the invasion, many of starvation. No-one knows how many, but it may have been a quarter of the entire population. I ask another nun about the psychological trauma accompanying such a legacy. "No-one ever asks about that," she says, and goes on to tell me about cases in the village where she works.

She is a foreigner and thought nothing of playing a prank with the children she was minding in an orphanage. Another nun was returning from town and as she heard the car pull up outside, she said "Quick, let's hide so Sister will think we're not here!" A girl broke into hysterical sobbing and shaking and could not be consoled for half an hour. The child had re-lived the terror of hiding from the soldiers. Others she spoke of wandered aimlessly round the village, lost in their tortuous worlds. One woman regularly wakes her in the night, hysterically screaming that the soldiers have killed her family.

In Maubisse I get stuck, having missed the last bus of the today on to Ainaro. A man approaches me in the market and says "Come with me". I ask him why, and who he is. He is not in uniform, but claims to be a policeman. Reluctantly, I follow him. At the police station we go through the usual questions and filling in of forms. Some police are playing soccer on a lawn and I ask if I can take a photograph. They are happy, but the commander shouts "No, no!" Across the road is a cemetery, and I am not to photograph that. In fact, he indicates that I am not even to visit the cemetery. Later, I discover that the cemetery contains mass graves - entire families who all died on the same day. It is telling evidence of the atrocities against civilians, including women and children.

The policeman annoys me and I walk back along the road to the guest house which sits atop a small hill. I watch rain clouds

receding across the valley and the mountains; the sun breaks through and a soft light falls onto the cemetery, little crosses on a green rise on the edge of town. I feel a strange and unspecific anger rise up inside me. I think of the waste of life, the suffering, and the injustice of twenty-two years of occupation. I think of the faces I have seen, worn down by years of hardship, the desperation in the eyes of the many people I have met. I think of Linda, a student I met in another town. We talked and joked in her house - her matriarch mother correcting rudimentary Portuguese, feeding me biscuits and coffee, asking me about Australia.

I think of her and how I did not visit again for fear of bringing trouble to her family; I was being watched and questioned by intelligence officers. In an idle aside I said that I did not trust politicians - they were all crooks - Suharto included. The room fell silent and I thought "This is it - I'm going to be charged with something. Insulting the president. Maybe I'll just be deported". Nothing happened, but I was too concerned to drop in again. I wish I had her address, or her surname, but what could I write, anyway?

In a black mood I wander outside, and meet a group of students from Dili. They have spent the Easter long weekend in Maubisse; a microlet is waiting to take them home. They ask me many questions, and then we joke about trivialities. They speak English and are very friendly and I want to ask them about their lives in East Timor, but they dance around my questions, almost teasing me, as if to say "We'll never talk about that". Of course they won't; not with me, anyway - a total stranger.

We drive down the hill and back to the church, taking our leave in a strangely poignant goodbye. Everything seems left unsaid. At the church is a mass baptism and wedding ceremony - all on Easter Sunday. Two priests are working through the crowd, hearing wedding vows and blessing babies. Later I meet the priest and he tells me that they have just finished christening 634 children and marrying 135 couples. He looks exhausted. That night there are parties all over town.

In my room the lights do not work, so I lie in my sleeping bag, thinking that travels in East Timor cannot leave a thinking person unchanged. There are so few tourists (I have seen only two in as many weeks); every tourist must get some sense of the Timorese people's reaching out to them, at the same time as noticing their deep fear of saying the wrong thing to the wrong person. There is an atmosphere of paranoia and suspicion. Anyone could be an informer, a spy. When the most basic human interaction is viewed with such suspicion by the state, you cannot but feel oppressed.

What do the Timorese people really want? How extensive is support

for the resistance? Of course, the Timorese are sick of fighting and oppression; nearly every family in the nation must have been deeply affected and lost loved ones in the struggle. Of course, some East Timorese have mixed feelings about the Indonesian presence and some even support integration. In every nation there are a wide range of political views.

If ever there was an argument for Indonesia's annexation of East Timor, the atrocities of the last twenty-two years must surely have nullified it by now. Only a free and open referendum can resolve the question of what the East Timorese people want. That is not an unreasonable demand, and the fact that the Indonesians oppose it suggests that they believe that the people would opt for independence. Perhaps they are hoping to delay a referendum until the transmigration programme has brought to East Timor enough Indonesians, from their own overcrowded islands, to outnumber the Timorese.

Two days later in Suai, sweating again at sea level, I am shown an oil well, the only hint I ever get of the wealth beneath the land and sea. The great valve is closed but the pump stands in a large pool of oil. While the East Timorese economy is very weak, and there needs to be an enormous effort made in areas such as education, health, and industrial development, East Timor has potential in its oil reserves. Australia and Indonesia have made deals to divide these between them; if ever East Timor is to have a future as an independent nation then access to the oil reserves must be renegotiated.

What can one expect for the future? All indications I get are that the resistance continues and is strong. An upsurge of guerilla activity since my visit and the Indonesian elections supports this impression. I see no indication that opposition to the occupation is waning. I am taken to transmigration camps where Indonesian migrants have been given land that some Timorese claim was once their own. There is a dispute over a cow that has entered a field and eaten hectares of rice. I am told that the president's daughter has been given land against the mountain side, which is to be planted for timber, and I am shown a nursery which is growing the trees.

In an abandoned hut we find a woman lying on a mat, hiding from her husband who has beaten her. In a few days her relatives will fetch her and take her home. The violence done to the people emerges in such ways. Recently, it has also been taken out on outsiders in Ocussi, an East Timorese enclave in West Timor. From the bus I see burned out houses where Timorese rioters turned against wealthy migrants. Resentment goes beyond issues of political independence, but it is bound up in the denial of opportunities for the Timorese.

The priests greet me warmly and we chat for a while, but suddenly

they "speak no English" when I ask about the riots. After eighteen days in East Timor I am tired. I go for a walk along the beach and look up at the mountains forming a great barrier to the inland. I pass rows and rows of houses under construction - precise rows of identical dwellings awaiting the arrival of new migrants and government officials. The new architecture cannot compare with the graceful villas, churches, and government buildings of the Portuguese administration. The traditional Timorese huts with heavy thatched rooves provide far better protection against the incessant heat.

I climb a hill and on top I find some gaudy statues of Christ with animals at his feet. The sun glints sharply off the sea. It is hot and quiet. I try to reconcile the all I have seen in the weeks gone by, but I cannot digest it yet. Perhaps later it will fall into place. Leaving feels like walking out on a people in need of friends. Perhaps I should not have gone to look, but I think of what so many Timorese have said to me:

"People must come. We want tourists. We want them to see what is going on, how we must live".

Thinking of the stories I have been told, of rape and detention, torture and killings, pressure to inform, forced sterilizations or contraceptive injections, and I doubt that Indonesia can ever win the trust of the East Timorese. Are they locked into a deadly embrace of resistance and oppression? How far must things go before meaningful dialogue can begin? Is the Indonesian state so committed to its ideological claim over East Timor that it is prepared to risk fanning the flames of bitterness and creating an interminable nightmare - an Asian Northern Ireland?

The presence of tourists offers the Timorese a small degree of protection. If something terrible happens, then someone may find out. It is not a fun place to travel; the accommodation and the food are poor. In many towns you cannot find a cold drink. But East Timor will stay on my mind for years to come. It pricks your conscience. They are probably right in saying that the more people who go, the sooner the world will stand up to Indonesia and say "Enough is enough".

(about 4660 words)

Originals of accompanying photographs available from the author - 35mm transparencies on Fujichrome Provia 100. Please negotiate any publication rights with the author.

© Peter Williamson, Sydney, July 1998

48 Kallaroo Road
Lane Cove NSW 2066
Australia
Fax: +61 2 9580 0778 Tel: +61 18 047 077

Photographs by Peter Williamson to accompany article titled "Travels in East Timor".

All photographs from March/April 1997.

Note that all prints are reproductions from transparencies. Originals available from Peter Williamson.

In order:

1) and 2) Students on trucks on the way from Dili to investiture of Bishop Nascimento in Baucau.
3) Timorese girl in street at investiture.
4) to 7) Representatives from different areas of East Timor.
8) and 9) Street parade - Bishop Basilio do Nascimento second bishop from left.
10) Choir at investiture.
11) Young Timorese man accused by Timorese youth of being an informer for the Indonesian intelligence.
12) Bishop Carlos Belo at service in the garden of his residence on Easter Sunday.
13), 14) The new Bishop Basilio do Nascimento, with task of establishing the new Diocese of Baucau.
15) Timorese boys playing cards and having fun, but growing up into a future of violence and uncertainty.
16) Microlet with passengers, driver and conductor in Hera.
17) Student make small and impromptu protest against Indonesian occupation while on truck en route to Dili from investiture in Baucau.
18) Young man beaten by police in protest in Dili on Palm Sunday, and being treated by nuns in a makeshift clinic in Dili.
19) Crowd leaving Good Friday service in ermera.
20) Catholic curch in Ainaru.
21) Mountains and valleys as seen from Maubisse. Timorese rebels still live, hide and launch raids from East Timor's mountainous interior.
22) Cemetery in Maubisse, which I was forbidden to photograph and to which I was refused access by police.
23) A woman waits all day in a market, hoping to sell a few fruit and vegetables.
24) Soccer player's spontaneous gesture of protest on seeing my camer. Dili.
25) Nuns and a man. Baucau.

Portraits of East Timorese people:

26), 27) Young men in bus station. Baucau.
28) Man. Maubisse.
29) Boy acting tough, friens laugh. Viqueque.

30) Three boys in a river. Viqueque.
31) Two girls. Maubisse.
32)
33) Old man with crucifix.
34) Young fisherman. Dili.
35) Boy. Viqueque.
36) Boy in camouflage fatigues. ~~Near~~ Suai.

Loose photos:
Woman weaving. Suai.
Old fisherman. Hera.
Girl with guitar. Ocussi.